Rural Community Organising: Going, going……gone?

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In 2014 I published *Now you see it... ...now you don't: a review of rural community organising in England*, for the Third Sector Research Centre. According to Bracht *et al* (1999: 86) community organization is "a planned process to activate a community to use its own social structures and any available resources to accomplish community goals decided primarily by community representatives and generally consistent with local attitudes and values. Strategically planned interventions are organized by local groups or organizations to bring about intended social or health changes".

Although I argued that the "trajectory of English rural policy has consistently promoted community-based approaches", I would suggest that - since 2014 - "the austerity driven agenda of the current administration is, more explicitly, focused on the role of the citizen – and communities – in 'rolling back the state' and transfer of responsibility, services and assets from the state to citizen (Conservative Party: 2010)". This highlights the contested nature of, and claims for, UK organizing. Is it enabling and empowering, or a means of off-loading responsibility on to communities and individuals with very different capabilities to respond?

Key findings in relation to English Rural Community Organising in 2014 were mirrored in the words of the North American Annenberg Institute for Social Reform (2011): "There are few models of rural organizing and little research to draw upon'. Rural Community Organising in England seems to be below, off or under the radar." I believe this summary still applies in 2018. There seem to be a number of key reasons for this. First, rural local authorities are struggling to deliver statutory services, with diminishing resources – both in terms of finance and staffing. So support for discretionary work – such as community organizing – represents an obvious target for cuts. If it does not *need* to be provided then it does not have to be. This in turn leads to a second effect. As the St Matthew's Gospel says "For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." In other words, as local councils struggle to provide, so they call on communities to step into the breach – to take over the local library; or provide a volunteer-run shop. But this *localism* plays into the hands of the haves, and those that can harness an abundance of 'social capital'. Take my own edge-of-Cotswolds town of Winchcombe; with a population of about 6,000. It can draw on the skills, experience, knowledge, networks, connections and resources of a significant number of retired professionals, who understand 'the system' and are capable of organising and campaigning.

On the other hand, for almost 40 years, no UK Government of any political stripe has significantly reduced levels of rural poverty. In 2014/15 – according to official figures – the "percentage of households in rural areas in relative low income was…16 per cent", including housing costs; and the "percentage of children in rural areas in absolute low income was…20 per cent after housing costs". A string of surveys undertaken since the 1980s all indicated broadly similar levels of poverty; for example McLaughlin (1986) surveyed 750 households in 5 areas of rural England and found that an average of 25% were living in, or at the margins of, poverty. Similarly the *Rural Lifestyles* report (Cloke et al, 1994), covering 3,000 households, had – as a headline figure - 23% of their occupants living in, or close to, poverty. This evidence seems to reinforce the idea that "whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath." This also chimes with the findings from researchers looking at developing world community activism: for example, Botes and van Rensburg in their

memorably titled article - *Community participation in development: nine plagues and twelve commandments* (2000) in which they make the point that community-based action can actually disempower and reinforce inequalities ('domesticate') rather than enable.

If we look at one example of organizing, encouraged through the *Localism Act* 2011, we can begin to see how community action may reinforce inequalities rather than actually empower people.

According to the UK Government "Neighbourhood planning gives communities direct power to develop a shared vision for their neighbourhood and shape the development and growth of their local area." However, when we look more closely at these community-generated plans we discover that "areas of below average affluence are less likely to enter into the neighbourhood planning process". Further, the Turley Associates 2014 research - *Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver* – went on to note that 39% of designated Neighbourhood Plan areas were located amongst the least deprived local authorities in England. The report also highlighted the fact that 75% of plans had been produced in the south of England, as opposed to just 25% in the north. This points to very different levels of community organising across the country.

Research into *User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England* (Parker *et al*, 2014) reinforces the picture that such voluntary action is easier for some communities than others. 72% of participants indicated that undertaking a Neighbourhood Plan had been more burdensome than expected. This is unsurprising given that plan preparation typically requires residents to commit several years to regular meetings, preparing, reading and commenting on drafts, taking part in consultations, dealing with planning professionals and local politicians; group work and negotiation, and making sense of jargonized and technically complex planning policies and language. The Intergenerational Foundation (2012) also argued that "the Localism Act Hands Power to Older Generations". Parish and Town councils lead on neighbourhood planning for their areas. However, local councillors are – on average - getting older (60 years), and are now 14 years older than the average UK adult (46). And only some 5% of councillors are under 35 years of age. The fact that over-65s make up 20% of the population, but 40% of local councillors, raises the prospect that the needs and aspirations of younger residents may be ignored, misunderstood or hidden. So community organising may well be unequal across generations as well as space. Thus proving to be fundamentally *un*sustainable – a central thread of the UK planning system and National Planning Policy Framework (Communities and Local Government, 2012).

I ended my 2014 review of community organising in England by concluding that "this remains a predominantly urban phenomenon. Even where formal community organising initiatives have been developed in mainly rural local authority areas, these have tended to be in larger population centres rather than smaller towns or 'deep rural' communities. In contrast, there has been a tradition, supported by Churches, Rural Community Councils and Town and Parish Councils of community development – albeit fragile in terms of funding, and unevenly distributed across England." Where I do see possibilities for supporting ultra-local rural community organising, is through the actions and vision of reinvigorated parish and town councils. These local authorities – invented in the 1890s - have the ability to levy a precept that is a local tax which can be used to fund community organizing and action. Whilst they have the power, they need the will and determination, to serve *all* residents: across the age range; black/white, gay-straight, differently-abled and so on.

A partnership between community representatives, the Transition Towns movement, development trusts (where they exist), parish council and principal authority could spread the workload, risks and multiply the resources to trigger local action. Such a team effort could also reduce the likelihood of more 'capable' communities continuing to monopolise self-help. These combinations may promote community 'ownership': it is, after all, the residents who stand to directly gain. Similarly, English town and parish councils would be fulfilling their mission to represent "the interests of the communities they serve and improving the quality of life and the local environment. Furthermore they influence other decision makers and can, in many cases, deliver services to meet local needs." Higher-tier authorities, such as district or unitary councils, can put localism into practice through joint working. .Such activity requires cooperation rather than coercion; and begs the overriding question: 'to what extent do town and parish councils have the willingness and capacity to pick up services cut by first tier authorities? Similarly, as shown by evaluations of rural *Big Local* initiatives, such local councils may be willing - and have the wherewithal – to raise a precept to cover revenue costs, but lack the capital to take on physical 'assets' such as youth centres.

Similarly, I commend the well-established 'hub and spokes' model of rural community development and planning, whereby a 'key settlement' (larger village/town) and the surrounding villages that look to it – for shopping, entertainment, work and so on – are considered jointly and planned for as a whole. In such a way the goal of sustainability articulated in the NPPF can be practically delivered.

But there are cautions. As the interim report *Empowered Communities in the 2020s* (Institute for Voluntary Action Research and Local Trust, 2017: 10) argued, there is a risk that community organising is "used to teach people to cope with austerity or co-opt them into substituting for the state". Further, community action "is not just going to happen. It needs to be a partnership between the local authority who need to release some control and the community who need there to be [someone] to support them". The 'scaffolding' – of external agencies – is essential to support and match the community drive, commitment, and resources.

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